

Media Smart for Schools

Why are body image concerns and eating disorders important?

The scale of the problem of body image concerns, eating disorder (ED) symptoms and diagnoses is immense. Research has found that in Australia:

- Body image is consistently ranked in the top 3 concerns of young people in large national surveys
- 75% of adolescent girls and 50% of boys report body dissatisfaction
- 52% of young-adolescent girls and 45% of boys had engaged in ED behaviours in last 12 months
- Over a million Australians will meet diagnosis for an ED each year at a socioeconomic cost of \$69.7 billion
- The COVID era has seen a 3-fold increase in waitlists for ED treatment; and a doubling of new ED cases.

What is Media Smart?

Media Smart (MS) is an interactive body image and ED risk reduction curriculum for Grade 6-8 classes, informed by the evidence-based principles of effective program development and delivery. **MS** increases resilience in young people by targeting media internalisation. This risk factor refers to when people believe they must look like ideal images seen in traditional or social media. **MS** encourages young people to be informed so they can identify, analyze and challenge such messages. The program also reduces the importance placed on appearance in determining one's self-worth which is the core thinking component of EDs.

Topics addressed in Media Smart

- Media literacy content on techniques used to manipulate images
- Discussion and challenging of pressures placed on young people
- A reflection on how social is social media?
- Encouraging identification of personal values
- Reducing/increasing behaviours that lead to increased/reduced pressure
- Role-plays on responding to unhelpful comments from peers and others
- Identifying helpful/unhelpful media messages and writing to the creator to praise/request change

What's unique about Media Smart?

MS has been evaluated in a large program of research with over 3,500 Grade 6-8 students of any gender, in 8 published reports including [two](#) of the [most rigorous](#) randomised controlled trials of any school-based ED risk reduction program. The findings reveal significant reductions in the below risk factors relative to control conditions or other programs. **MS** is now considered the leading ED risk reduction program worldwide for school classroom settings by international leaders in the field.

Risk factors significantly improved by Media Smart

- 58% reduction in the onset of clinical concerns about body shape and weight
- Shape, weight and eating concerns
- Dieting
- Body dissatisfaction
- Pressures about appearance
- Internalisation of media messages
- Bullying (about appearance/weight)
- Depression and anxiety symptoms
- Perfectionism
- Feelings of ineffectiveness (low self-esteem)
- Excess screen time
- Increase helpful physical activity (e.g., bike riding, sport, playing outside)



Simon Wilksch & Tracey Wade

By contrast, many other school body image programs have not been tested at all, or have only been evaluated in small studies. In fact, over the last 30 years it has become clear just how hard it is for body image programs to achieve significant benefits, with some even showing evidence of harm.

Thus, **Media Smart** is unique in its benefits to young people.

What's else sets Media Smart apart?

Another key difference is that **MS** takes a broad approach to mental health. It was developed with an awareness that poor body image not only increases ED risk but a host of negative mental health outcomes: depression, anxiety, perfectionism, poor self-esteem, social isolation, school attendance, school participation, and self-harm. Thus, preventing body image issues has flow-on benefits to numerous aspects of mental and physical health.

Unique, evidence-informed decisions were made when developing **MS** including:

- Program content informed by research that it is not necessary to discuss sensitive topics to achieve reductions in risk. i.e., there is no discussion of EDs or other sensitive mental health topics in **MS**
- Whilst presenter teaching style is important, program content is not dissimilar to some existing school curriculums. This was intended to make it easy for teachers to deliver and minimise the amount of mental health skill necessary to deliver the program.
- We chose a learning area that is fun and appealing to young people – social and traditional media.
- Over 98% of participants rate the program as valuable and enjoyable. Written feedback from participants includes: "I used to get upset because I couldn't look perfect (no one knew how I felt)", "I think about the lessons and feel better about myself", "It showed me not to perceive all women the same way", "Be happy with yourself the way you are", and "I think my friendships grew".

Who developed Media Smart?

MS was created by Dr Simon Wilksch and Professor Tracey Wade at Flinders University. Simon and Tracey are both researchers and clinicians who help provide treatment to people experiencing an eating disorder. Thus, Media Smart was developed by clinical psychologists who work at the coal face, seeing the serious impact social media and other pressures can have in the development of EDs. Simon is also a Clinic Director at [Advanced Psychology Services](#), an eating disorder treatment service in Adelaide for children, adolescents, and adults.

What about obesity?

There is a concern about obesity in our society currently. However, recent research suggests there are some risk factors that apply to both EDs and obesity. Therefore, a program that can reduce ED risk factors might also have benefit to obesity risk. Thus the [Prevention Across the Spectrum](#) trial was conducted to examine whether Media Smart and two other programs could reduce risk factors for both problems in 1,316 Year 7 and 8 girls and boys. Media Smart was clearly the superior program showing benefits on a range of risk factors including important obesity risk factors such as physical activity and screen time. In addition, *Media Smart* girls had half the risk of control girls of developing clinical concerns about their body shape and weight at 12-month follow-up. This is an extremely encouraging finding given this is regarded as the most important ED risk factor, and as a key therapy target in people with EDs. Thus this study indicated **MS** reduced risk factors for both EDs and obesity.

How can my school access Media Smart?

The Media Smart program content includes:

- 1) Information for teachers on body image and EDs
- 2) Easy to use detailed lesson plans for teachers
- 3) A workbook for students.

The program is available in electronic format for \$450 per school (+GST).

<https://www.flinders.edu.au/engage/community/clinics/mediasmart>



Please note purchase of the program entitles that school to ongoing use of the program (late primary school, middle school and early high school would be most appropriate). Money received from **MS** sales funds further ED research.

Questions or further information?

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